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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 002095

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SUBJECT: JOCKEYING BEGINS TO REPLACE AILING GREEK ARCHBISHOP

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Classified By: Political Counselor Robin Quinville
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. As the ailing Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Christodoulos prepares to return to Greece from the Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, potential successors have begun to position themselves for what is seen as his likely death within the next six months. The position of Archbishop carries enormous ability to influence public debate in Greece. The process of selecting a successor will likely impact political discussion of policy issues, most notably the Macedonian name issue.

12. (U) In June, Christodoulos was diagnosed with liver and colon cancer and spent 40 days in an Athens hospital. In August, he left Greece en route to the University of Miami/Jackson Memorial Hospital, for treatment by an internationally acclaimed Greek-American physician. Christodoulos waited approximately 50 days to locate a new liver but once the surgery began, doctors had to cancel the planned transplant after discovering that cancer had spread to his abdomen. During his stays in both Athens and the U.S., the Greek media has closely followed the medical travails of the man who has been their prelate for nearly ten years.

CHRISTODOULOS THE TRADITIONALIST

13. (SBU) Christodoulos was elected Archbishop on April 28, 1998, at the age of 59. The highly educated, multi-lingual lawyer and theologian was perceived as being a forward-thinking, social activist (Reftel A). His tenure, however, will likely be remembered more for his largely traditional stands on a host of social and political issues. Christodoulos, who still consistently ranks as the first or second most popular leader in Greece, surpassing virtually all politicians, occasionally raised the ire of politicians for what they saw as his unwelcome interference in matters of state.

14. (SBU) On domestic issues, Christodoulos led the (ultimately unsuccessful) effort by the Orthodox Church to maintain indication of a person's religion on their national identity cards. He also led the failed opposition to a law permitting conscientious objectors to do alternative service, stating that not performing military service was to show disrespect for the moral principles of the nation. Christodoulos steadfastly opposed calls for a separation of church and state and he successfully lead the opposition to a new mosque and Islamic cultural center in Painia, an area of the city near the international airport. He claimed that the image of a mosque to new arrivals in Greece would cause

confusion. A separate site was ultimately chosen for the mosque, which remains to be built.

15. (SBU) Christodoulos frequently commented on other issues of national debate. Christodoulos voiced opposition to recognizing Macedonia, calling the matter "a permanent cause for stirring up passions, since concealed behind them one suspects territorial demands when conditions permit." Christodoulos was also a firm believer that the Orthodox Church played a central role in the development and preservation of Hellenic heritage throughout the Ottoman occupation. He would tell school children to ignore their text books where the books questioned this principle and he brought heavy pressure to bear upon the government (leading to the eventual recall of a history text book). He also told citizens to resist the "dechristianization" of Europe through the European Union. But it was Christodoulos who will also be remembered (though vilified by some) for inviting Pope John Paul II to visit Greece, the first pontiff to do so in nearly 1300 years.

WILL CHRISTODOULOS RESIGN?

16. (U) A team of reporters with television cameras camped out night and day in front of the Archbishop's Athens hospital prior to his departure for the U.S. Since then, his state of health has been played out in detail on evening talk shows and in daily news reports. Of late, discussions have started to focus on who might succeed Christodoulos upon his death or resignation. For his part, Christodoulos said that he has no intention of resigning and that while he realizes that he is not irreplaceable, it is still too early to discuss a

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successor.

WHO MIGHT REPLACE HIM?

17. (U) Most analysts have identified a small handful of current Church leaders as candidates to replace Christodoulos. Chief among them are Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Zakynthos (a longtime rival of Christodoulos and the first to publicly state that since Christodoulos' condition was untreatable, it was appropriate to begin the succession discussion); Metropolitan Ieronymos of Thebes (a close contender in the 1998 selection process who was derailed due to charges of involvement in a financial scandal); Metropolitan Anthimos of Thessaloniki (a vocal opponent of Greece compromising in any way on the Macedonia-name issue); and the soft-spoken Metropolitan Efstathios of Sparta (well known for his charitable work). Some of the dark horse candidates include Bishop Nikolaos of Mesogaia, an expert in astrophysics and biomedical technology and a former NASA consultant; Metropolitan Dorotheos of Syros (who some claim is supported by those close to Christodoulos solely in an effort to maintain their positions of power); and finally, Metropolitan Ignatios of Dimirias, the former diocese of Christodoulos near Volos who is well known for his Sunday TV talk show on state TV.

18. (C) COMMENT: The selection of a new Archbishop of Athens and all Greece can have important consequences for domestic discussion of a range of issues, including the Macedonia name issue. As potential successors begin positioning themselves as Christodoulos' successor, they will comment on New Democracy government actions (and international affairs) in order to bolster their leadership credentials. On key issues like Macedonia that will leave the weak ND government even less room for flexibility.
COUNTRYMAN